Re-visiting Well-Known Techniques to Improve the Pronunciation of Segmental Features (and Venturing into the New Normal)

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This project aimed at improving students' pronunciation of segmental features through the use and activation of some learning strategies, including the systematic practice of transcribing, reading aloud and recording texts into phonemic symbols. The participants were two homogenous learner groups attending the 2nd year and doing English Phonetics II in 2017 and 2019 at Loutaif Institute in Orán, Argentina. The experimental 2019 group's performance was compared to the control 2017 group. The intervention focused on the implementation of written and oral home assignments in the experimental group as well as the teacher's instruction on learning strategies and informal feedback on the group's weekly-based performance. Both groups' performances were registered by the teacher in class. The data considered five indicators: attendance, written and oral home assignments, and written and oral mid-term tests. These indicators were described and analyzed in relation to the influence produced by the application of the aforementioned techniques through the use and activation of learning strategies and their influence on the pronunciation of segmentals while developing automaticity and autonomy. By the end of 2019, the results showed a significant improvement in students' performance. These techniques can now be implemented in the new normal by utilizing some ICT tools.

Keywords: Segmental Features, Phonemic Transcription, Reading Aloud, Recording, Learning Strategies, Autonomy, Automaticity

1. Introduction

Kelly (1969 in Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Godwin, 2016: 2) stated that throughout the history of language instruction, the teaching of pronunciation has been regarded as the 'Cinderella' area within the research field. However, since the late 19th century onwards, there has been a growing interest in this area. The pragmatic nature of this action-research project derived from my personal observation and analysis of my teaching practice. As Nunan points out "research is derived from a real problem in the classroom which needs to be confronted'' (2009: 18). Therefore, the starting point of this study could be placed in the subject English Phonetics II at Loutaif Institute in Oran, Salta, Argentina.

Far from discovering any new method or technique, this project revisits well-known techniques: phonemic transcription, reading aloud and recording the students' productions. Indeed, these techniques are implemented worldwide to teach pronunciation; however, it is only recently that they have been used with students attending a specific English Phonetics II course in the northwest of Argentina as part of a research project.

1.1. The Research Problem

English Phonetics II was an annual course that consists of three-hour classes on a weekly basis for around 30 weeks per year. It was taken in the second year of the English teaching training studies at Loutaif Institute. The classes involved theory and practice. There were different types of tests and different types of assignments to be done in class and at home, usually in a written format. Despite fulfilling certain requirements like attending the whole course and succeeding in the written part of the subject, many students tended to fail their oral performance in their end of term tests and final exams. In other words, the practical trigger for the research problem was the students' low performance in oral tests in the subject English Phonetics II.

Observing this situation in the subject under discussion, I persisted in wondering about ways to improve my teaching practice and, thus my students' learning. In my pursuit, I started pondering on facilitating opportunities to develop learning strategies and learners' autonomy to help them improve their academic performance, especially oral performance. The immediate change in teaching methodology was to include more oral practice in class but that was not enough due to the short amount of class time. Then, the oral practice veered in the direction of home assignments.

This study assembled the pattern of three specific techniques (i.e. phonemic transcritpion, reading aloud and recording) as home assingments along with the use and activation of learning strategies with the purpose of improving the participants' pronunciation of segmental features while developing their automaticity and autonomy. Even though the mentioned sequence of tasks was far from innovative because they are still widely used in Argentina and abroad, the novelty lied on the specific academic and regional context of Loutaif Institute, a state teaching training center, situated in Orán, a department in the northwest of Argentina.

2. Literature Review

As far as the research literature is concerned, the reviewed studies enrich our understanding of ways to teach pronunciation and improve oral performance achieving more or less success considering a variety of factors and techniques. However, none of the examined studies gathered all the features together that the current project deals with at the same time. Indeed, the studies involved one, some or many of the features that the current project deals with but not all together developed in an organized sequence in the given particular context.

Lintunen suggested that "phonemic transcription is an effective teaching method for foreign language learners of English" (2005:1) at advanced levels. He carried out the study on 34 Finnish first-year-students taking a course in English pronunciation. His conclusions asserted that the participants' oral and written performances were quantitatively and qualitatively related in the testing period. That is to say that those who better transcribed were the ones whose pronunciation developed the most during tests and the other way round. The tests reflected students' progress. Lintunen also attributed the effectiveness of phonemic transcriptions to the similiarities in the morphene-grapheme relationship between English and Finnish.

Hilaire (2014) explored the role of noticing in pronunciation learning and the tasks of reading aloud and recording were part of this case study. Kai – the only participant- made great progress in the accurate pronunciation of three specific phonemes between the pre- to the post- instruction when reading aloud. Hilaire (2014) concluded that the practice of these segmental features in context rather than in isolated exercises contributed to improve accuracy in pronunciation. Noticing played a significant role in learning the target segmentals. Actually, the researcher also highlighted that if a student did not pronounce well, the teacher should bear in mind that the learner may not be aware of certain phonemes and should draw attention to them instead of assuming that the student could not pronounce the segmental features because they were difficult. Scaffolding in instruction was a relevant aspect to be considered.

Scaffolding was also studied by Sardegna and Macgregor (2013). Their main goal was to empower fifteen graduate learners by instructing them on the use of pronunciation strategies and equipping them with the necessary material. Results indicated that teacher

scaffolding greatly contributed to the students' improvement on accuracy and to the appropriate selection of tasks for self-improvement outside the class.

Flaco Garcia & Mosquera Perea (2014) did not accomplish positive results for their classroom project on the improvement of pronunciation through reading aloud targeted at 5th, 6th and 11th graders from two different public high schools in Colombia. However, the researchers focused their findings only on 5th grade class performance and detailed factors that hindered the development of the project. This class showed unwilligness to participate and had a very low level of English –less than basic. The class time was very limited (i.e. one hour a week) for the 35 participants to perform all the activities. Finally, the class lacked technological tools. They concluded that "no matter how hard we tried we did not find that students' pronunciation improved that much" (2014:1). Assessing the failure, they asserted that the technique of reading aloud was useful because it allowed students to practise but this technique did not work with this group. The researchers noticed that the participants felt demotivated for their poor level and discouraged after teacher's correction in front of the other students in class.

In 2014, Adrian's action research project tested the efficacy of a reading aloud task in the teaching of pronunciation. This study analyzed the reading aloud performance of twenty students in their first year of English Studies in the language lab at the University of Basque Country for ten weeks. On the one hand, the researcher concluded that the components of noticing, awareness and explicit instruction were effective and facilitated improvement in pronunciation after analysing the two recorded reading aloud tasks. On the other hand, the questionnaire resulted in the students' firm belief that reading aloud helped them improve their pronunciation. The research conclusions also supported the idea that explicit corrective feedback was beneficial for university learners.

Theodore Bratton (2019) carried out a case study based on the effectiveness of reading aloud on the development of segmental features. The project took place in Japan and the only participant was a Taiwanese student whose mother tongue was Mandarin. The emphasis was on the improvement of the Mandarin native speaker's production of English vowel sounds in the context of a private lesson. The results showed the subject's great enhancement at segmental and suprasegmental level by the end of the sessions of reading aloud accompanied with corrective feedback. In addition, this project resulted in boosting the participant's motivation.

Pérez (2015) examined arguments for and against the technique of reading aloud (RA) along with mental strategies and shared her experience with the implementation of this task in Phonetics and Phonology courses at UNCuyo and other institutions. She agreed with Birch (2007) who stated that those who had phonemic awareness could read better because they could connect sounds with symbols and attach meaning to sounds. She concluded that "if RA is to be used successfully, it needs to be used sparingly, sensitively and appropriately, with clear learning objectives, and should be regarded as only one of the many tools in a teacher's kit" (Pérez, 2015: 42).

As it has been previously observed all the aforementioned papers discussed one or more relevant elements for this paper. What is more, they paved the way for the theoretical framework underlying the sequence of the three specific techniques of transcribing texts into phonemic symbols, reading the texts aloud and recording them.

Theoretical Framework

The first step of the sequence refers to the written technique of the phonemic transcription (Schnitzler, 2014; Harmer, 2005; Lintunen, 2005) which makes specific use of the phonemic chart (Underhill, 1994). The information about segmental features that students already count with is part of the declarative knowledge (Anderson, 1983); which stems from attending the annual subject English Phonetics I in the first year of their teaching training track. This information entails theoretical grounds on segmental features (such as definitions, classifications, and descriptions of ways of articulation of phonemes) and starts with practice on phonemic transcription. The learners are expected to reinforce declarative knowledge and develop procedural knowledge (Anderson, 1983) which is directly related to how tasks are performed by means of the activation and implementation of learning strategies.

Secondly, the transcriptions play a significant role because they serve to associate phonemic symbols, normal spelling and actual pronunciation with the subsequent techniques of reading aloud and recording the transcribed texts. These last two techniques involve the actual oral performance. Then, these tasks developed in a continuum are expected to activate some learning strategies (Oxford, 1990, 2011; Cohen, 2007; Rost, 2011). In this specific case, the focus is on the memory, cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning strategies (Oxford, 1990; 2011) (see Figure 1) which contribute to the development of the tasks. Indeed, the metacognitive learning strategies are especially relevant because they allow the students to self-monitor and self-evaluate by noticing errors - Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990; 2010) - and by re-signifying the role of errors (Corder, 1967). The higher the frequency of occurrences, the better for the students' development and improvement of the pronunciation of segmental features.

Finally, the recurrences of the tasks accompanied by a raising-consciousness process lead to the automatic processing of information (Anderson, 1983, Logan, 1997). In other words, recurrent practice leads to automaticity (Anderson, 1983; Logan, 1997). Automatic pronunciation of phonemes is one important objective of the activities, that is, that students could pronounce well without spending too much on analyzing or trying to remember the exact pronunciation of words. Then, home assignments intrinsically involve self-study and they are expected to develop learner autonomy eventually (Oxford,1990; Harmer, 2005). All in all, the expected outcomes are automaticity and autonomy in both pronunciation and learning practice.

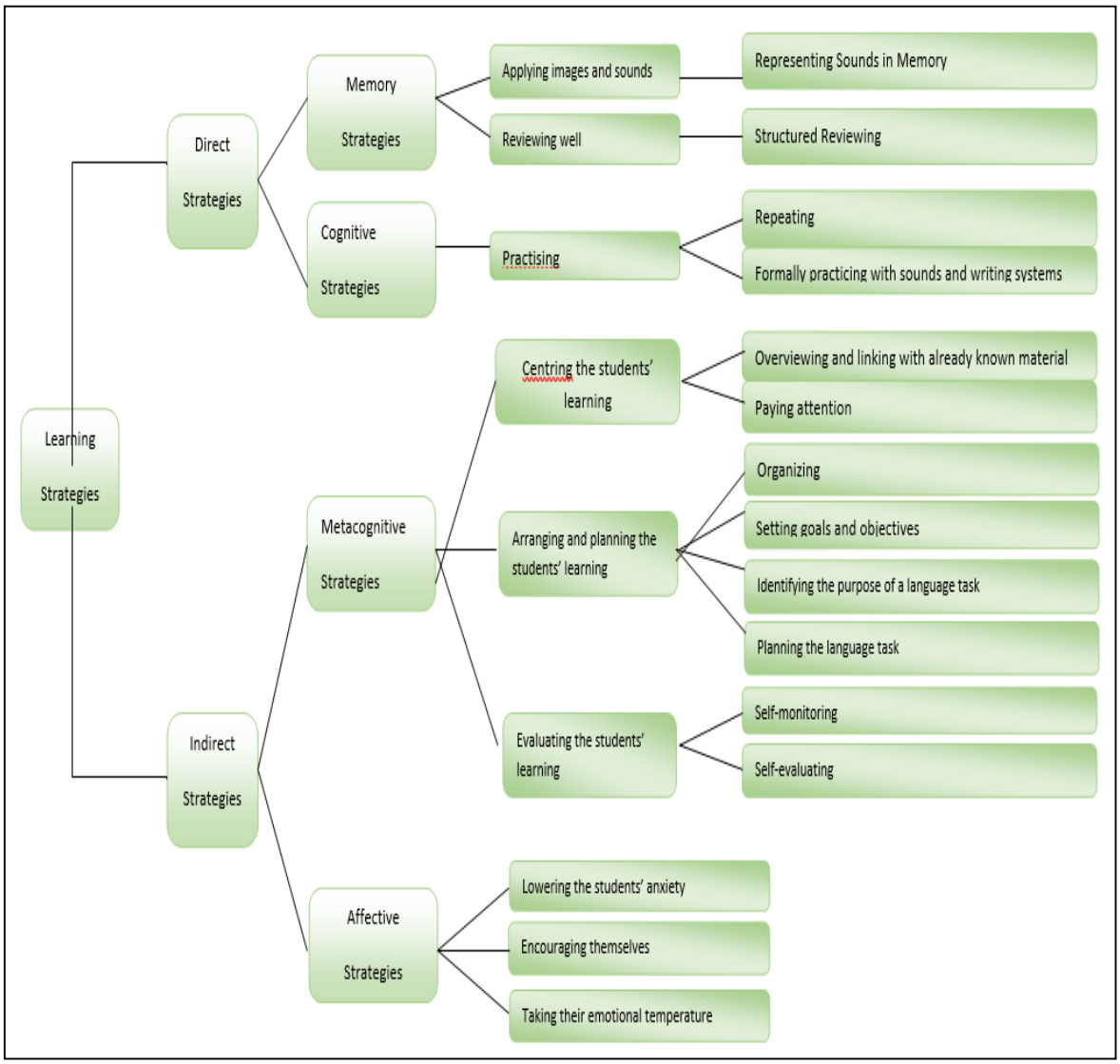


Figure 1 Diagram of the Adapted Classification of some memory, cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning strategies

Taking into account all the aforementioned data, this study addressed the following general and specific research questions.

General Research Question

Did the regular practice of the patterned sequence of phonemic transcription, reading aloud and recording improve students' pronunciation of segmental features through the use and activation of some memory, cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning strategies in an English Phonetics II class at Loutaif Institute?

Specific Research Questions

A. Could the use and activation of some memory, cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning strategies influence, be observed and/or measured in the occurrence of learners' home assignments (i.e. the sequence of phonemic transcription, reading aloud and recording of texts)?

B. Did the regular practice of written home assignments (i.e. phonemic transcriptions) influence the practice of students' oral home assignments (i.e. reading aloud and recording) in the English Phonetics II class at Loutaif Institute?

C. Did the regular practice of written home assignments (i.e. phonemic transcription) improve students' results of their written mid-term tests and academic performance in English Phonetics II at Loutaif Institute?

D. Did the regular practice of oral home assignments (i.e. reading aloud and recording) done as a sequence of tasks improve students' results in their oral mid-term tests and academic performance in English Phonetics II at Loutaif Institute?

E. Did the regular practice of home assignments (i.e. the sequence of phonemic transcription, reading aloud and recording of texts) favour the development of learners' automaticity and autonomy in English Phonetics II at Loutaif Institute?

3. Method

Context: Instituto de Enseñanza Superior 'Dr. A. Loutaif' N° 6023' or Loutaif Institute is located in San Ramón de la Nueva Orán, Salta Province in the northwest of Argentina. English Studies were launched in 1997 and the teaching training program was divided into first, second, third and fourth year. There were three different changes of curricula in 2000, 2012 and 2019. Concerning the English Phonetics subject, the major curricula change took place in 2012 when the three Phonetics subjects were reduced to only two (i.e. English Phonetics I & English Phonetics II). In 2021, English Studies began a process of closure; however, the center still offers degrees in Spanish Language and Literature Teaching, Teaching at Primary level, Training in Public Administration or Training in Tourism.

Participants: The subjects of this study were students from English Phonetics II attending the 2nd year of the English teaching training career at Loutaif Institute in two different periods: 2017 and 2019. There were 25 students in 2017 and nine participants in 2019.

Despite their own peculiarities and differences in quantity, both groups shared enough similarities to make them comparable. Around 70% of the students attending both groups were females. The age range went from 19 to late 30s. There were a few older though. All of them shared the same theoretical background as regards phonemic information and the use of the phonemic chart or the International Phonetic Alphabet and transcriptions. Both groups shared the same instructor (and current researcher) in English Phonetics I and English Phonetics II, i.e. the evaluation criteria and the teacher's discretion as regards linguistic requirements were the same for both groups. Generally speaking, students attending 2nd year were deemed as highly motivated. All of them willingly entered first year, satisfied the requirements from first year and were eager to continue their studies considering that higher education is not compulsory in Argentina.

This study was descriptive and comparative. It observed, described and compared two homogenous groups of students in their personal development and achievements in the subject of English Phonetics II. The control group attended in 2017 and the experimental group in 2019. The last group experimented a series of written and oral home assignments along with intervention. Intervention could be regarded as the teacher's informal feedback and the students' use of some learning strategies when performing home assignments. The control group lacked this intervention. While giving the feedback, the teacher made the learning strategies explicit by writing them on the blackboard. Given the fact that the

feedback was conducted individually, the teacher wrote down on the board her own suggestions and the students' suggestions upon the application of the strategies.

3.1. Data Collection and Procedure

The database for the study was collected by the teacher- researcher through weekly written reports on classes in English Phonetics delivered in 2017 and in 2019. The teacher gathered "impressionistic notes" (Oxford, 1990: 194) as well as structured data. These reports contained the following information per class and per year:

- Number of students
- Number of classes
- Number of written home assignments
- Number of oral home assignments
- Number of mid-term written tests
- Number of mid-term oral tests
- Percentages of attendance
- Percentages of delivered written home assignments
- Percentages of delivered oral home assignments
- Percentages of passed and failed mid-term written tests
- Percentages of passed and failed mid-term oral tests
- Percentages of students' academic performance by the end of each term and year
- Teacher's personal notes on the students' oral performance when listening to their oral assignments
- Teacher's personal notes on the students' weak and strong points in oral tests
- Teacher's discretion on students' overall performance

Within these reports, there were five main indicators that counted as five threads running through this subject and this study. They allowed to measure and determined students' performance in English Phonetics II. These indicators were:

- Attendance
- Written Home Assignments
- Oral Home Assignments
- Results of Written Mid-Term Tests
- Results of Oral Mid-Term Tests

These five requirements implied that the students had to practise, study and work inside and outside the classroom. The evidence was shown in the percentages obtained throughout the year. If the students did not reach the minimum percentage of class attendance, they would lose the right to do mid-term tests. If the students did not perform home assignments, they would also miss the prerogative of attending tests. If the students passed all the written exams but failed the oral tests, they could not succeed in English Phonetics II and thus, failed to reach the status of 'regular' student. If the students passed all the oral tests but failed the written ones, they would also fail the subject. Therefore, it was a question of reaching a well-balanced performance in the different indicators to succeed in English Phonetics II.

In English Phonetics II 2017, students were required to attend 70% of all classes during the year, to present 70% of the written home assignments, to pass two out of the three written tests and to pass the oral test in order to become 'regular' students. In 2019, learners

were similarly requested to attend 70% of all lessons, to deliver 70% of written and oral home assignments and to pass 75% of all written and oral tests to obtain the status of 'regular'. 'Regular' is a Spanish word that describes the academic status learners are supposed to obtain if they meet a number of requirements by the end of the year. This status is one of the students' main goals since it allows participants to advance to the next course in their teaching training studies.

4. Overall Results and Discussion

These five indicators were regarded as reliable enough to determine success or failure in the students' academic performance. Table 1 and the pertaining graph indicate that by the end of 2017, 48% of the control group became 'regular' students, 32% did not satisfy the requirements and 20% of the class abandoned the course at some point during the year.

Table 1 Overall Results of Students' Academic Performance 2017

Student Status	Student Frequency	Student %
'Regular'	12	48%
'Free'	8	32%
Abandoned	5	20%
Total	25	100%

Graph 1 Overall Results of Students' Academic Performance 2017

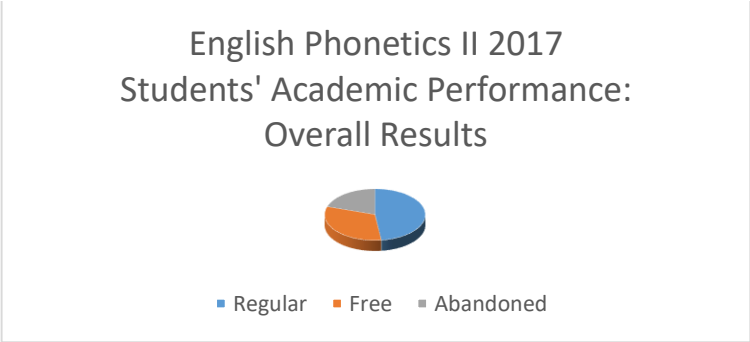
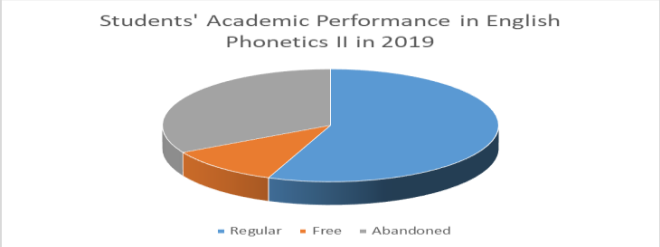


Table 2 and the corresponding Graph 2 show that 56% of the subjects of the experimental group attained the academic status of 'regular' student, 11% of the class did not meet the minimum requirements and 33% quitted the subject by the end of 2019.

Table 2 Overall Results of Students' Academic Performance 2019

Student Status	Student Frequency	Student %
'Regular'	5	56%
'Free'	1	11%
Abandoned	3	33%
Total	9	100%

Graph 2 Overall Results of Students' Academic Performance 2019



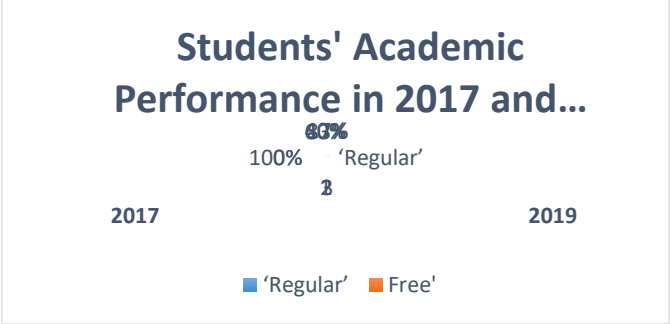
In both the control and experimental groups, there were a number of students who stopped attending classes by the end of the first quarterly period and they are represented in tables 1 & 2 and graphs 1 & 2 as the ones who abandoned. Indeed, those who quitted the course restrained themselves not only from coming to classes but also from performing assignments or sitting for mid-term tests in the second quarterly period in 2017 and 2019.

Therefore, it could be interpreted that those who actually finished the course were 20 students in 2017 and six students in 2019. These figures truly represent the 100% who wholly participated in class, did their homework, sat for mid-term tests and make-up tests (receiving the teacher's intervention in 2019). Table 3 and graph 3 show and compare the results of both control and experimental groups without including dropouts. In 2017, out of 20 students, 60% of them reached the status of 'regular' students and 40% the status of 'free' students. In 2019, out six students, 83% accomplished the academic status of 'regular' students and 17% the status of 'free' students.

Table 3 Comparison of Overall Results of Students' Academic Performance in 2017 and 2019 without including dropouts

	2017			**2019**	
Student Status	Student Frequency	Student %		Student Frequency	Student %
'Regular'	12	60%		5	83%
'Free'	8	40%		1	17%
Total	20	100%		6	100%

Graph 3 Comparison of Students' Academic Performance in 2017 and 2019 without including dropouts



Before going any further, it is of outstanding importance to clarify that improving the pronunciation of segmental features meant to be able to perform well in oral mid-term tests. By improving pronunciation, learners were expected to read, pronounce and speak better.

For the English Phonetics II subject, the command of the oral performance was and is vital. Again, doing well in oral-mid-term tests meant that these students could fulfill the goals of the course thus reaching the academic status of 'regular' students. Those who could not manage oral skills would become 'free' students. In short, the tasks of phonemic transcription, reading aloud and recording were expected to affect learners' performance in tests that eventually determined their final academic performance and academic status.

As regards the teacher's role, I was expected to reflect upon my own teaching practice and take action. Firstly, the actions that were taken can be observed in the number of assignments which was doubled (from five assignments in 2017 to 13 assignments in 2019). Within these assignments, there was a difference between written and oral format. There was also the introduction of quarterly oral mid-term tests. But most importantly, the teacher offered informal feedback to each student when bringing their home productions to class. This informal assessment was meant to coach, to guide and to offer advice on the learners' performance and their application of learning strategies by writing them down on the board without any decisive marking. These steps benefited both teacher and students as this intervention can be said to have boosted students' improvement and as a result more learners reached the academic status of 'regular' students while less students became 'free'. In brief, it can be stated that due to the intervention, the experimental group outdid the control group.

As far as attendance was concerned, both groups registered a marked tendency of high levels of attendance in the first terms of both years – an average of 90% of students attending above 70% of the lessons. Attendance became a problem by June, that is to say, in the second half of the year. In both learner groups there was a sharp decrease in attendance from the first term to the second term. In 2019, this drop was even sharper.

The causes for this drop are not discussed in this project but it did affect the learner groups' performance. This reduction in attendance was directly reflected on home assignments and mid-term tests because class attendance was the way for the teaching learning process and exchange to occur and the only available way then and there to register the performance of assignments and to carry out tests. This decrease was directly observed in the percentages of home assignments and mid-term tests.

The indicator of 'attendance' is directly reflected on the indicator of non-attendance or 'abandonment'. In 2017, 20% quitted and in 2019, 33% stopped attending classes (see Tables 1 & 2). It could be observed an increase in 'abandonment' from 2017 to 2019. Now, non-attendance could be attributed to a wide range of factors, namely academic, health or family difficulties, job opportunities, economic crisis, emotional or personal problems. Students who quitted classes were considered in the final figures because they also affected the other indicators such as the quantity of delivered home assignments and test results. Attending or not attending classes was crucial for delivering the assignments performed at home. By attending, students would hand in their homework, ask for explanations, talk about their difficulties, receive teacher's feedback and do tests within the classroom.

Now, the indicators are to be discussed and related in the light of the research questions.

4.1. General Research Question

- ✓ Did the regular practice of the patterned sequence of phonemic transcription, reading aloud and recording improve students' pronunciation of segmental features through the use and activation of some memory, cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning strategies in an English Phonetics II class at Loutaif Institute?

The outcome confirmed this premise. Here the focus was on the intervention performed in the experimental group 2019 in comparison to the lack of intervention in the control group of 2017. Comparing the overall results obtained by both groups by the end of each year, the performance of the pattern of phonemic transcription, reading aloud and recording did help and promote improvement in students' pronunciation in 2019. In fact, the students in the experimental group excelled in performance the control group. That is to say, that more students could meet the minimum requirements to reach the academic status of 'regular' which reinforces the hypothesis that the intervention proved beneficial. At this point there were two possible interpretations of the figures and both favoured the experimental group to a lesser or greater extent.

Considering the lesser extent of improvement, the overall results of students' academic performance (see tables 1 & 2) included every participant that began but may not have finished the course, that is, abandonment was part of the general outcomes. Having this into account, 48% of the control group gained the status of 'regular' students while 56% of the experimental group did it in 2019. Therefore, an improvement in academic performance was observed by the end of 2019. Even though this rise was not dramatic, the increase of 8% did exist.

Regarding the greater extent of improvement, the overall results (see table 3 and graph 3) dismissed dropouts due to the fact that this group of students quitted classes and prevented themselves from being involved in the teaching-learning process. At this point, the overall results show the experimental group significantly outdid the control group. In fact, in 2017 60% of the class reached the status of 'regular' students without any intervention. In 2019, a dramatic rise was observed when 83% of the students attained the 'regular' status after the intervention. This improvement meant that more students could read and speak more accurately and better by the end of 2019.

Other figures were also scrutinized in terms of those learners who got the academic status of 'free' student (i.e. those who failed to meet the minimum requirements to pass the subject). According to tables 1 and 2, 32% acquired the status of 'free' students and 20% quitted in 2017. In 2019, 11% of the class were granted the status of 'free' students and 33% abandoned.

In relation to table 3, there were 40% and 17% of 'free' students in 2017 and 2019 respectively. In 2019, there was a sharp reduction when only 17% of the class attained the status of 'free' students. This decrease in number of 'free' students can be taken as a gain because it meant that less students failed to perform the expected regular practice. In both interpretations, there was a *gained loss*, which was more noticeable in table 3.

In brief, there was a substantial gain in 2019 and the experimental group greatly outdid the control group. Not only more students (83%) performed better but also less students (17%) failed their oral performance. This improvement in academic performance could be attributed to the regular practice throughout the year.

4.2.1. Specific Research Question

A. Could the use and activation of some memory, cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning strategies influence, be observed and/or be measured in the occurrence of learners' home assignments (i.e. the sequence of phonemic transcription, reading aloud and recording of texts)?

The use and activation of learning strategies were observed and measured through the results obtained from students' home assignments. In other words, the existence and occurrences of these home assignments meant the use and activation of learning strategies. In this project, the students performed all the tasks at home, there were no witnesses but there were the results or the productions of that practice. The mental associations could not be visualized but they could be materialized by the learners' homework.

Due to the delivery of home assignments, students discussed how they used and activated the mentioned learning strategies while the teacher wrote them down on the board as part of her feedback. Both teacher and learners suggested the use of some memory, cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning strategies. In this sense, the teacher also took notes which could account for the observation and influence of the strategies on the students' performance of assignments. These notes opened the path to pieces of advice on the application of the mentioned strategies.

In brief, even though there was not a direct observation of the use and activation of these learning strategies, the effect of the occurrence and performance of home assignments could be observed and measured in students' learning outcomes and their own recounts.

4.2.2. Specific Research Question

B. Did the regular practice of written home assignments (i.e. phonemic transcriptions) influence the practice of students' oral home assignments (i.e. reading aloud and recording) in the English Phonetics II class at Loutaif Institute?

The practice of students' oral home assignments was influenced and depended on the regular practice of written home assignments. Only the experimental group's performance was considered in this question because there were no oral home assignments in 2017. The percentages obtained from the regular practice of written and oral home assignments were consistent in both terms in 2019. In the first quarterly period, 78% delivered most of the tasks, 22% handed in more than half activities in both the written and oral format. In the second term of 2019, 56% performed most of the assignments, 11% did more than half of the assignments in the oral and written form - 33% were absent. In both terms, the percentages obtained from the regular written practice matched the percentages from the regular oral practice. Therefore, both practices directly affected, influenced and depended on each other.

Even if learners could perform written and oral assignments separately, this was not the case in this project based upon the matching data. For Lintunen (2005), phonemic transcription enhanced students' pronunciation which happens to back up the premise under discussion. Just as Lintunen's results that showed that "the subjects' performances in the pronunciation and transcription tests were both qualitatively and quantitatively related" (2005: 4), the same situation took place for the experimental group. Now for the sake of improving students' pronunciation of segmental features, both types of tasks (written and oral) complemented each other and led to the other.

Indeed, the practice of transcribing texts influenced reading aloud and recording those texts because while performing the assignments, students were guided to raise phonemic awareness (Perez, 2015; Alderson, 2005; Stanovich 2000), to notice (Schmidt, 1990) mispronounced phonemes, to monitor themselves and learn from their own errors (Coder, 1967). The idea of transcribing a text using phonemic symbols allowed students to gain certainty about the pronunciation of the text (Harmer, 2005; Underhill, 2005). Once, they had a general idea of the pronunciation of the text, then, the recording occurred.

4.2.3. Specific Research Question

C. Did the regular practice of oral home assignments (i.e. reading aloud and recording) done as a sequence of tasks improve students' results in their oral mid-term tests and academic performance in English Phonetics II at Loutaif Institute?

As far as oral practice is concerned, only the experimental group was considered in this question because this was the group that underwent oral home assignments and oral mid-term tests each quarterly period. Just like the aspect of written practice in tests, oral mid-term tests included practice and theory, not only reading aloud. That is to say, students were asked to answer theoretical questions and read texts aloud in tests while the oral practice entailed reading aloud and recording transcribed texts. It would have been better to assess only reading aloud because the practice was based upon this. This can be considered another limitation of project. However, the study acknowledges the overall results of oral mid-term tests, not only the reading aloud part.

In 2019, the participants - who regularly attended classes- were also actively involved in the development of oral assignments and finally reached the status of 'regular' students. In the first quarterly period, all the class fulfilled the oral assignments but only 66% passed the first mid-oral test. In the second quarterly period, 67% performed their oral homework, 44% passed this second test and 33% were absent in the term. Later, those who sat for the oral make-up test obtained a passing mark.

In the overall results, 83% of the experimental group succeeded the oral practice (irrespective of class droppers) and were more successful than the 60% of the control group (see table 3).

4.2.4. Specific Research Question

D. Did the regular practice of home assignments (i.e. the sequence of phonemic transcription, reading aloud and recording of texts) favour the development of learners' automaticity and autonomy in English Phonetics II at Loutaif Institute?

The occurrence and delivery of home assignments served as evidence to acknowledge that students intended to develop responsibility (Rost, 2011) and did their homework at first hand. According to the theory, automaticity is an aspect that requires time, effort, practice. Both autonomy and automaticity are part of a process that evolves over time (Logan, 1997). The fact that students handed homework in in class, i.e. the activities were being done and the learning strategies were being used, indicated that both automaticity and autonomy were in the process of occurring (Anderson, 1983).

When the assignments were delivered, the teacher registered the realization of homework and took impressionistic notes on the individuals' performance. The instructor kept records and made observations on the students' progress, i.e. on levels of automaticity reached by the participant, for example on the quality of errors on segmental features. Autonomy was more limited to the student's ability to develop their own ways of learning. This could be seen when they offered suggestions on the use of learning strategies to the teacher. These instances served as evidence to clarify how deeply involved and autonomous these students were in their own learning process.

5. Conclusions, Limitations and Implications

The **findings** of this research paper can be summarized as follows:

- The intervention of home assignments (phonemic transcriptions, reading aloud and recordings), oral mid-term tests and teacher's informal feedback did improve the academic performance of the experimental group in 2019 in comparison to the control group. There was a major gain because 83% of the participants in 2019 reached the academic status of 'regular' students whereas 60% of students reached this status in 2017. The former mentioned class outdid the latter one.

- There was also a decrease in the percentages related to those who attained the academic status of 'free' students. In 2017, 40% of class failed the course while 17% of the experimental group did it in 2019. This meant that less subjects were unable to handle the minimum requirements of attendance, assignments and mid-term tests. And it also meant that more students benefited from the 2019 intervention.

- There was an existing connection between written home assignments (i.e. phonemic transcriptions) and oral home assignments (i.e. reading aloud and recording transcribed texts). At a superficial level, the students clearly read and recorded the texts already transcribed in phonemic symbols. At a deeper level, the written practice contributed to the development of the oral practice. While performing both assignments, students activated memory, cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning strategies. Therefore, it can be stated that written and oral practice were "both quantitatively and qualitatively related" (Lintunen, 2005: 4) in this project.

- The use and activation of some memory, cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning strategies could be observed not only through the occurrence and delivery of students' home assignments but also and mainly through the teacher's feedback. Here, the instructor registered on the board the strategies that were used and suggested by the students themselves when discussing homework and giving individual and personal feedback. By the end of the feedback, there was an available list on the blackboard to be taken into consideration by the students.

- The teacher's oral and informal assessment positively affected students' performance because this feedback allowed students to be mistaken, to take advantage of the errors, to discuss the application of learning strategies, to receive guidance and advice rather than a mark. This feedback was performed individually and made explicit the application of learning strategies on the board. Here the teacher kept impressionist records on students' performance where she noted down the realization of the tasks and the students' progress.

Up to this phase, these results could be regarded as not conclusive due to the fact that this was the first stage of a larger project. It was the starting point for further research.

5.1. Limitations of the study

- Observations and record keeping are valid tools to collect data but there are many other ways that can be used. As it has been established, this is the first phase of a larger project and future phases are likely to implement SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning) developed by Rebecca Oxford (1990), videos, interviews - to mention just a few- as methods or techniques for data collection.

- Oral mid-term tests, recordings and phonemic transcriptions were limited to the teacher's impressionistic or structured notes. In other words, the students' productions were available only at the moment of delivering them in the classroom but not for further analysis. This should be fixed in the forthcoming stages of this research.

- Written and oral tests included not only phonemic transcriptions and reading aloud but also other theoretical and practical sections. Tests should have been restricted to the practice of transcription and reading to observe and measure if they directly affected each other. See a sample of a written mid-term test in the Appendix.

5.2. Implications

By 2017 and 2019, the teaching learning process was mainly conducted within the classroom; that was the known way and for many of us the only way to carry out this process. Nowadays, the world wide known sanitary situation about Covid-19 along with the extended periods of quarantine have nurtured online versions of delivering classes in Argentina and in most of the countries. Of course, this has also opened the spectrum to a hardly explored territory for many of us. The type of assignments required in this study could be improved due to having many other technological devices and virtual platforms at hand that teachers and students have been suddenly and urgently encouraged to use and gain the greatest possible advantages from them. Indeed, these new ways would be part of another project or another phase of this same project.

Considering the online versions, a possibility could be peer appraisal and collaborative work within the context of virtual platforms. Another online possibility could be a twist in the type of assignments. The ones required in this study could be adapted and tailored due to having many other technological devices and virtual platforms at hand. As a matter of fact by mid 2020 and 2021, the above implications were put into practice with the use of the following free and public websites.

5.2.1. Venturing into the new normal

To practise transcription, students were recommended to use the following pages:

- https://tophonetics.com
- https://glotdojo.com/phonetic
- http://www.photransedit.com/online/text2phonetics.aspx

Students are advised to use these sites although phonemic symbols should also be revised because some do not match Underhill's chart or IPA. Students can also manage to listen to the transcriptions at different speed levels.

To practise listening, students could surf:

- https://www.esl-lab.com (to listen and perform multiple choice activities)
- http://radio.garden/search (to listen to radio stations from around the world)
- https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/learning-english (to listen and perform activities)

To practise recording yourself, students are recommended to explore:

- https://vocaroo.com
- https://online-voice-recorder.com

To conclude, I agree with Pérez (2015) that if reading aloud is to succeed, it requires to be used sensibly, properly with clear learning aims, it should be considered as one of the many resources from the teacher's part (2015: 42). Therefore, and following Miroslav

Pawlak and Magdalena Szyska's (2018) claim, it is necessary to explore strategy use as another resource to be used in the classroom. Cohen and Macaro claim that there are no correct or incorrect strategies but there is a strategy that is more appropriate for a specific student, for a specific task and for a specific aim (2007, 153). Now, even though there are probably many other strategies or ways of improving students' pronunciation of segmental features, this research paper establishes the way I (the teacher /researcher) found more appropriate for my students seeking to meet their linguistic needs in the time allotted and satisfying the needs of the subject matter. In short, my way is directly related to the use and activation of some memory, cognitive, metacognitive and affective learning strategies through the patterned sequence of phonemic transcription, reading aloud and recording in my English Phonetics II class. However, the new normal encouraged and still encourages us to venture beyond all the unveiling possibilities to come.

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Appendix

A sample of a written mid-term test of English Phonetics II from 2019 at Loutaif Institute.

English Phonetics II (2019) Loutaif Institute N°6023

Student's Name: _____

Written Mid-Term Test

A. Write the following extract in normal spelling.

// wen aɪ lʊk bæk ɒn maɪ ʧaɪldhʊd // aɪ wʌndə haʊ aɪ sə ˈvaɪvd ət ɔːl // ɪt wɒz əv kɔːs / ə mɪzərəbl̩ ʧaɪldhʊd // ðə hæpɪ ʧaɪldhʊd ɪz hɑːdlɪ wɜːθ jɔː waɪl // wɜːs ðən ðiː ɔːdɪnərɪ mɪzərəbl̩ ʧaɪldhʊd ɪz ðə mɪzərəbl̩ aɪrɪʃ ʧaɪldhʊd / ənd wɜːs jet ɪz ðə mɪzərəbl̩ aɪrɪʃ kæθəlɪk ʧaɪldhʊd //

B. Read the following utterances. Rewrite them using Brazil's system. Predict the use of tones and justify the use of 3 (three) tones and prominence.

Cathy: I know he is married.

Jane: That makes you the other woman.

Cathy: I am not the other woman, am I?

Jane: Well… when did you meet him?

Cathy: Last Christmas! I remember we were next to the tree.

Jane: He was probably not alone then!

C. Listen and mark the tones (taken from English Pronunciation in Use Elementary by J. Marks CD D Track 26)

A. // allRIGHT?//
B. // YES //
A. // not NERvous//
B. // a BIT //
A. // don't WOrry // it'll be FINE //
B. // i HOPE so //
A. // RIGHT // let's START // are you REAdy//
B. // i THINK so //
A. // OK // the first QUEStion IS ….// WHAT's your NAME //
B. // my NAME? // it's ... JACK JONHson//
A. // that's RIGHT// well DONE // DI fficult? //
B. // WELL// not TOO bad//
A. // RIGHT// the SEcond question is…… what's 37,548x7,726? //
B. // WHAT//

D. True or False? Justify if False. Enlarge the idea if true.

1. Syllabic consonants occur in syllables that contain only consonants.

2. Intonation is significant, systematic and characteristic.
3. Intonation can be used to clarify the speaker's message only by means of Key.
4. Open listings have a specific number of items.
5. Pitch is expressed in the same way in every individual.

E. Listening Comprehension. For speakers 1-5, choose which of the subjects (A-F) the people are talking about. There is one extra subject which you do not need to use. (taken from Upstream B2+ Student's Book by V. Evans & B. Obee – CD 5 Track 7)

A. Communications	Speaker 1 ☐
B. The Economy	Speaker 2 ☐
C. Travel	Speaker 3 ☐
D. Health	Speaker 4 ☐
E. Entertainment	Speaker 5 ☐
F. Shopping	